

The case of the philosopher sleuth

BY PAUL NUSSBAUM

IN CONTRAST TO THE SMUG GENTRIFICATION of the San Francisco neighborhood, the third-floor walk-up office is identified only by the gilt-colored mailbox. Apt. Four: Josiah Thompson.

Apt. Four's occupant also remains determinedly ungentrified. He's a round-faced man with lively eyes and a nose that's been broken and repaired more than once. He's at a battered desk, ignoring the view of the Golden Gate Bridge as he scatters cigarette ash in the general direction of a broken ashtray purloined from the Peninsula Hotel, Hong Kong.

Private investigator Josiah Thompson, "Tink" to all but his mailman, is on the phone, talking to a public defender, pondering the prospects for keeping an accused murderer out of the gas chamber.

"I'll go up to Folsom to talk to him. . . . Yeah, well, who knows how much cocaine he did?"

This is what Tink Thompson has come to. Tink Thompson, professor of philosophy, Haverford College, 1966 to 1976. Schooled at Andover and Yale and Oxford. Author of *Kierkegaard* and *The Lonely Labyrinth*. Here he is, skulking around the shady fringes of the legal world, looking for angles to get a killer a break.

For 12 years, Thompson has been living as a latter-day Sam Spade, doing the grubby and unglamorous work of a real private eye, photographing cheating wives, tracking down kids in custody fights, finding reluctant witnesses in murder cases.

And if he'd left it at that, he'd have been just another anonymous, mid-life career-switcher, albeit an imaginative one. But the hibernating academic in him couldn't

sleep forever. So he wrote a book, *Gumshoe — Reflections in a Private Eye*, describing his conversion. Now he's the only private eye in San Francisco trying to juggle talk-show gigs and jailhouse interviews.

The phone rings again. A friend of a friend has, well, a problem with the Moonies, they've snatched his son. Could Tink get him back?

Thompson agrees to meet with the parents this evening. He's done that kind of work before, but usually only in divorce battles where one parent has custody, and he is hired to snatch a kid back from the other parent.

Phone down, Thompson swivels to the computer over by the water heater. Sam Spade should have had one of these. He could have checked up on Brigid O'Shaughnessy in a hurry.

Thompson punches keys, swears routinely, finally links up with the Department of Motor Vehicles. He is looking for a man whose daughter wants him found. This is how you do it these days if you're a licensed private investigator. The state lets you into its files, and you get the latest dossier on John Doe: age, address, vehicle registration.

In this business, every statistical edge helps. Agatha Christie and Arthur Conan Doyle got it wrong — a detective doesn't usually solve a crime. And, much as Thompson likes to compare his career to that of writer

Dashiell Hammett's detective, Sam Spade, he doesn't get many red-haired dames fainting in his arms either. Mostly, he's an investigative tool of defense lawyers.

He has worked on 77 homicide cases since 1981. He's helped the defense of Huey Newton, William and Emily Harris, Stephen Bingham, a Japanese terrorist bomber and two American Indian Movement members accused of killing a cabdriver. Defense lawyers William Kunstler and Leonard Weinglass have repeatedly hired him. So has a broad array of public defenders looking for holes in the state's cases against their unsung clients. For a fee (now \$85 an hour), Thompson will search for alibis or mitigating circumstances or helpful witnesses.

Say, for instance, that you're a lawyer whose client is charged with killing a fellow inmate in prison. Your client was jailed in the first place after being convicted of murdering a man in Chinatown. With another conviction, your client faces the death penalty. But you're convinced your man didn't get a square deal in his first trial. So you hire Tink Thompson to see what he can turn up on that old murder conviction. Good move.

Thompson reviews the old police notes, finds the partially legible name of a witness to the murder. He uses old address directories and a chat with an ex-neighbor to get the witness' full name, plugs it into his computer, finds another ex-address, persuades the former landlord's answering-service operator to help track the guy down, discovers he's in Los Angeles. A phone call, and, bingo, you've got a witness who saw the Chinatown killing and can identify the killer, and he says it wasn't your guy. Eventually, his information proves crucial in winning your client's release from jail. Good thing you had a sharp detective.

That case was one of Thompson's most satisfying. But usually a case involves you in a murky world of lies and half-truths and sleazy characters, and you try to find the ones that will help your client. "Justice" rarely figures in the equation.

"Basically," Thompson shrugs, "what I do is serve power. I wasn't put on this planet to judge who goes to jail and who doesn't."

WHY? WHY WOULD A TENURED PHILOSOPHER give up the comfortable life at 5 College Lane, Haverford, Pa., for \$5 an hour and lots of styrofoam coffee?

The short answer is easy: This is more fun. But short answers are rarely good enough for philosophers. This is the long answer:

"It's the ironic consequence of success," says Thompson. "Success tends to build a kind of box for you: You've succeeded in this field, so it becomes very, very difficult to think of doing anything else. Also, in middle age, you become aware that you're going to die.

"So, just at the point where you've constructed a kind of box for yourself out of your own success, you're

also aware that time is fleeting. Do you want to stay in that box for the rest of your life?

"Well, I didn't."

So San Francisco represented more than just geographical change, he decided at 41, when he was granted a sabbatical to move West to write a biography on Nietzsche.

But the book foundered. Thompson met someone in a cafe who had hired a local private detective, Hal Lipset, and on a whim, Thompson asked Lipset for a job. To his shock, Lipset, for \$5 an hour, took him on.

Even before this decision, Thompson's career path had not been the standard professorial model.

The product of an affluent, pioneer East Liverpool, Ohio, family, Thompson spent his youth trying to overcome his pedigree and his diminutive size (he's now pushing 5-foot-8). A nationally ranked junior golfer at 16, he was a boxer and football player at Yale who graduated *magna cum laude*. As a Navy officer trained in underwater demolition, he led a frogman detachment that preceded the 1958 Marine landing in Lebanon. He was arrested several times in anti-Vietnam War protests, and his usual mode of travel was a BMW motorcycle. After the John F. Kennedy assassination, he did his own investigation and became a self-made expert in the case.

He was a co-director of Life magazine's investigation of the assassination, and in 1967 he published *Six Seconds in Dallas*, which argued there were three assassins.

But he was not an instant success as a detective.

He lost his surveillance targets in traffic. He got picked up as a peeping Tom when photographing a cheating wife. He left his lights on all day when he was parked outside a suspect's house.

But he scored big when he was sent to New England to recover a drug dealer's \$30,000 from a house before the Drug Enforcement Agency could find it and use it as evidence. He and wife Nancy rented the house, posing as a philosophy professor and his wife. They found the money in the attic.

He was hooked.

When the sabbatical was over, Thompson, the incurable romantic, dumped Nietzsche for Hammett. Detecting made him an actor in real life with immediate consequences, a regular rush of adrenalin. So what if it wasn't as useful?

"What I'm doing is not as meaningful as teaching, in the sense of doing good. I don't believe that in being a detective I'm doing much good. But I don't see what I'm doing in moral categories."

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JOSIAH THOMPSON WAS ALL SET TO WRITE HIS NIETZSCHE BIOGRAPHY, UNTIL THAT CHANCE ENCOUNTER . . .

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TINK

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IT'S TIME TO RESCUE HIS Battered blue 1969 Volvo for the drive to Bolinas in Marin County, where the Moonie's parents wait.

Up into the sunlight of Mount Tamalpais, Thompson is saying, "From what I've been told, we've got parents who want to break their kid out of a Moonie camp. But there's no way to break him out if he wants to stay."

Dad is an airline pilot, who sits stiffly in his armchair. Mom gets teary when she talks about their son's suspicions — accurate, it turns out — that his parents want to kidnap him. Thompson scribbles down their tale on a yellow legal pad. He sips a beer and nods sympathetically when Dad says he wants to break his son out and take him to a deprogrammer, who has already been retained.

"She says it would take a minimum of three days, but that when it worked, it

would be just like turning on a light switch."

"Why don't you tell him you're supportive? Why don't you just tell him you love him?" says the detective.

"Oh, we've played that role," says Dad. "That didn't work, either."

With handshakes all around, Thompson declines the case.

"They've bought into the cult of expertise," Thompson says later. "They want to believe there's an expert — the deprogrammer — that can make everything right. They're seeking clarity where there is none."

Down the hill, on the edge of this old lumber town, is the Thompson house, actually three rustic wood buildings connected by walkways, set among the pines.

At dinner with Nancy and 22-year-old son Ev (daughter Lis is at Columbia Business School), the Thompsons raise their wine glasses and repeat Sam Spade's toast: "Success to crime."

After the dishes are cleared, Thompson

and Nancy, a real estate agent, attempt to manufacture jam from the fruit of their apricot tree. Every year, they fail. Every year, Tink buys a new case of Ball jars. By now, they could supply a glass museum.

Nancy, small and blond and mischievous, still looks much like the co-ed who was attracted more than 30 years ago to the Yale undergrad from East Liverpool.

A classmate of hers had been dating Thompson, and "she begged me to go out with him, because she was now bigger than he was," Nancy grins. "He showed up in a salmon pink '35 Ford roadster, and we drove up to 86th Street in New York. We spent our first date going from bar to bar, getting carded, and we ended up in a coffee shop. The Ford shorted out in the rain on the way home."

Why did she keep dating him?

"He was a good talker. I hadn't had a good talker in a long time."

The jam is poured into this year's jars.

Thompson is still a good talker, enthusiastic, informal, engaging. It's easy to see

why he would be a hit in a classroom. Today's lesson is Sam Spade.

"Sam Spade was described by Hammett as 'a hard and shifty fellow who could take care of himself in any situation.' That is the ideal of the detective. But I think Hammett didn't mention another aspect of Spade that ignites my imagination."

And this is where the philosopher kicks in again.

"Twenty years later, Camus wrote a book called *Le Myth de Sisyphe*, in which he described the absurd hero as a man who lived a life without justification or excuse. Now, I think that's what Spade is really doing in *The Maltese Falcon*. And that is what I would like to see myself as doing as a detective, living that sort of life, without justification or excuse."

"I couldn't live that kind of life in the academy. As a detective, I can. And I think maybe that's why I'm a much happier man now than I was 12 years ago when I left the academy." □